

President Approved 'Harassment' Plan

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The CIA decision to mine harbors in Nicaragua was approved by President Reagan on the recommendation of White House national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane and the Pentagon, despite "misgivings" expressed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz, informed administration officials said yesterday.

These officials said that the proposal was presented to Reagan as part of a "scaled-down" CIA plan of "harassment" to cripple the economy of Nicaragua and make it more difficult for its Sandinista government to aid leftist rebels in nearby El Salvador.

"As presented to the president, the whole plan was one of harassment of the Sandinistas," said one official. "It did not focus on the mining."

The official declined comment on the extent of Reagan's involvement in or knowledge of the mining decision, saying only that it was "part of a package" that was discussed with the president.

Other parts of this package included increasing from 15,000 to 18,000 the U.S.-financed "contra" guerrillas opposing the Sandinistas and redirecting their activities to emphasize attacks on power plants, bridges and other economic targets.

Administration officials gave conflicting signals yesterday about whether the mining of Nicaraguan ports would continue.

One official said the question of whether to continue the mining was "under review at high levels." A Republican congressional source, who was highly critical of the administration for jeopardizing Capitol Hill support for additional aid to El Sal-

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vador, said of the mining operation, "They have no choice except to abandon it."

But another official said that the contras consider the handmade acoustic mines, which explode noisily but are unlikely to sink a ship, to be "highly cost-effective."

"They're a small force facing a large Nicaraguan army," said this official. "The mines are like a sign that says, 'Beware of the dog.'"

Nonetheless, the prevailing view within the administration seemed to be that there at least would be a pause in the controversial mining operations.

In Rome, Alfonso Robelo, leader of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance, one of the principal anti-Sandinista groups, said that the mining would be stopped if the Sandinista government lifted news censorship.

The mining operation was discussed in a National Security Planning Group meeting chaired by Vice President Bush in February, according to one official. White House and State Department officials who asked not to be identified said that Shultz was initially skeptical of it, apparently because of the possibility of diplomatic protests like those that have been made by France and Great Britain.

According to another official, after a mine laid by the CIA-backed rebels damaged a Soviet tanker in the Nicaraguan port of Puerto Sandino on March 20, Shultz expressed "very profound misgivings" but never made a formal objection to the policy.

One source suggested that the discussion of options may have been inhibited because the administration does not formally acknowledge that the CIA is backing the forces fighting the Sandinistas.

At his news conference last week Reagan declined to comment on specific tactics being tried to undermine the Sandinista regime.

But he said Nicaragua was "exporting revolution to El Salvador" and added, "As long as they do that, we're going to try and inconvenience that government of Nicaragua until they quit that kind of action."

The laying of mines in Nicaraguan harbors was controversial even within the CIA, according to one official in the agency, who said there was "not a consensus" on whether to support it during the planning stage.

The CIA views its involvement as a "holding action" until the covert war could be stepped up if Reagan is reelected in November, according to a senior administration official.

The White House yesterday disclaimed any such political strategy, but Reagan has said on several occasions to senior officials that he does not intend to "lose any country to communism on our watch."

Last week a Republican political strategist discussing the upcoming presidential election cam-

paign said that a "tight case" can be made for the administration policy of supporting the government in El Salvador and harassing the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. "This isn't Central Europe or Central Asia or Central Africa," he said. "It's Central America."

His point, which has been made at other times by administration strategists and pollsters, is that the American people think that the United States has vital interests in Central America, even if they would not accept the same argument for U.S. involvement in Vietnam or Lebanon. The strategist said that he expects that administration policy in Central America will be debated in the fall election and that the issue is, on balance, "a plus" for Reagan.

While Shultz was the only senior official known to have voiced objections to the mining operation, the administration's subsequent maneuver to avoid consideration of the action by the International Court of Justice also was questioned by White House chief of staff James A. Baker III and White House counsel Fred F. Fielding, according to one official.

Nevertheless, this official said, Baker and Fielding agreed to go along with the administration's announcement that it would not abide by decisions by that body, known as the World Court, concerning Central America for the next two years.

Baker reportedly wound up directing the strategy under which guidance was hastily prepared for the State Department last Friday in anticipation of questions about a decision by the Nicaraguan government to take its case against the mining operations to the World Court.

The State Department legal office, informed at mid-week that Nicaragua would take its case to the World Court, quickly came up with four precedents for nations saying that they would not accept World Court decisions in particular matters.

While the State Department cites this as sound legal precedent for its action, some administration officials and Republican members of Congress were critical of the administration's decision to mine the harbors and then declare its indifference to the court.

One official said that the administration was in the position of both "advocating the rule of law and showing little respect for it."

The criticism was directed primarily at CIA Director William J. Casey for proposing the mining activity and at national security adviser McFarlane and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger for supporting it.

"Nobody likes to oppose the CIA on a matter like this, but there should have been more discussion about the diplomatic consequences with the president," said one official in an implied criticism of McFarlane.

Staff writer Bob Woodward contributed to this report.